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Fair Trade Learning in an Unfair World

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ABSTRACT: Recent critical research on international experiential or service learning, (IESL), raises questions and reveals challenges for host communities working in partnership with universities to provide community-based learning opportunities for students, primarily from the Global North. The exercise of power, privileges of transnational mobility and the potential reinforcement of a neocolonial relationship between partners, within the context of globalized higher education, are among the barriers to equitable practices facing practitioners. As researchers and practitioners work with host partners to articulate ethical and equitable responses to IESL practices, the model of fair trade standards has recently gained traction in this field as an opportunity to provide an ethical framework, developed by practitioners and host partners, to provide transparency and accountability for the enactment of IESL programs. Fair trade standards, in the context of commodities pricing and labour, have produced some measure of improvement in trade practices; yet in this field too, researchers have identified gaps and inconsistencies that often leave unchanged the benefit to and experience of local partners outside of the Global North. This essay first considers some of the key issues challenging IESL practice and moves to consider the possibilities and/or contradictions of applying a Fair Trade framework for IESL. Finally, the concept of encounter, developed by Ananya Roy and colleagues, emerges as a dynamic pedagogical framework that rather than foreclosing questions of history, power, privilege and ongoing global poverty, seeks to confront these issues at the root sources.

Introduction

How ought we to engage with communities of Others? This question continues to challenge my teaching and research over many years as a practitioner and scholar of international experiential and service learning, (IESL) in higher education. Currently, IESL

programs continue to proliferate on Canadian campuses and beyond as a response to the increasing demand for global learning opportunities (Stein & Andreotti, 2015; Beck, 2012; Peters, 2005). Critical researchers, however, have produced a robust body of research over the past decade that calls attention to the myriad ways that IESL, as a pedagogy and practice, engages youth in programs that in many ways reinscribes neocolonial relations between privileged youth from predominantly Northern universities. While the expansion of globalization and global mobilities inspire proponents of the practice frame IESL participation on campuses as a practice of global citizenship, critics highlight inequities in power, racial and socioeconomic inequality (Larkin, 2013). Mahrouse (2014) argues that the intentions of specifically white, transnational volunteers or activists may, consciously or not, undermine efforts to build solidarity within communities marginalized by poverty or conflict. In response to critical concerns, many researchers have worked to develop strategies to minimize or ameliorate negative effects from IESL. These are dilemmas that colleagues and I continue to debate and discuss as we seek to work through the historical and political legacies that contextualize IESL practice.

As a researcher and practitioner of IESL at a small Canadian university college, I am troubled by pedagogies that facilitate or normalize the oppression or exclusion of Others, and appreciate the efforts that many IESL practitioners are making to ensure anti-oppressive, equitable and ethical programming. Many practitioners strive to orient programs that will deepen their students' understanding of how their positions and identities interact with Others in a global context, and to explore the complexities between institutions, including universities and structures that sustain unequal power relations, locally and globally. This means engaging in efforts to map the ways in which the practice of IESL may slip, disavow, or make ambiguous the ways in which we contribute to or are complicit with the production of inequality through participation within the practices of global capitalism. The question that continues to dog IESL practices is aptly framed by Tiessen and Huish's (2014) title: *Is it global citizenship or globetrotting?* It is at this nexus, the privilege of global travel and the role that higher education plays within discourses of neoliberalism, emphasizing individual choice, entrepreneurialism and techno-management strategies that there is a risk for educators to sidestep critical examination of the structural sources of poverty and inequality (Choulariaki, 2013, Simpson, 2005). Further claims by educators and students to be work for solidarity and justice are subject to critique as well. For example, Kapoor (2005), conceptualizes the notion of the "narcissistic samaritan," as one who is caught between the desire to work to empower the Other while maintaining a claim for her/his own neutrality. While this label may sound overly critical when applied to those endeavouring to enact generosity and justice, discomfort is a product of the disruption of mainstream narratives that align and affirm, versus challenge or critique, our identities (Stein & Andreotti, 2015).

I am framing this paper as a reflection on the challenges that confront IESL practitioners, who are engaging with critiques of IESL and the challenges they confront in attempting to establish ethical practices. First, I briefly consider the commodification of

IESL and youth volunteering and review emerging critical research on current practices. Next, I examine ways in which the demand for IESL programming and diversification of programs (both public and private) increasingly capitalize on the profitability and attraction of IESL. Several researchers are working on strategies to resist unethical practices and to build just IESL partnerships. At this point, I would like to open a dialogue on the possibilities and limitations of emerging fair trade standards for ethical IESL practice. In response to critical research, Hartman et al, (2014) have constructed a detailed framework for fair trade IESL (fair trade learning, here on, FTL), drawing on the experience of fair trade commodities. Building on recent research on fair-trade commodity networks, my concern with the FTL approach arises from the potential for a reliance on a normative set of standards that may neutralize, normalize and/or obscure the historical, and ongoing structural roots of poverty and inequality. Finally, I will consider how engaging a lens of complicity may make visible the myriad ways IESL operates in a space of ambiguity, concluding that it is in this space of encounter and discomfort where we may discover new questions to ask of our practices and our aspirations for social justice.

Engaging Youth in Poverty Alleviation: Consuming Volunteer Experiences

How should we respond to the needs of distant others? Ironically, the desire to help Others perceived to be in need occupies an ambivalent space in the current political moment. At a time when many in Canada remain divided over if any, or how many refugees at all should be welcome to Canada, programs advertising opportunities for youth to get involved in service and global volunteerism all over the world are intensifying in popularity. It is a phenomena with an appealing potential for commodification. It is not surprising that, in an era of easy global mobility for the affluent, it is fairly easy to sell the idea of youth, travelling internationally and independently to help distant others through the image of a mobile, exotic lifestyle (Jefferess, 2012; Tiessen & Huish, 2014). Invitations to "give back to the community" or to "make a difference in the world" are, according to Vrasti (2013) ways to engage the "post-materialist and anti-modernist sensibilities of the Western ethical consumer looking to demonstrate their superior social capital by 'traveling with a purpose' (p. 2). These are persuasive appeals and the benefits accrued extend beyond moral personal enrichment. Drawing on Simpson (2005 in Vrasti, 2013), international volunteer experience is now a "standard requirement for higher education and career development" (p. 2).

Glossy photos that depict primarily white youth working in villages tap into a highly mediatized notion of global citizenship, a borderless myth which encourages youth to travel beyond national borders to make a difference in the world. These narratives continue to draw thousands of students to IESL programs, regardless of growing public critique (Vrasti, 2013; Simpson, 2005). This lucrative market was the target of a documentary in 2015 directed by Brad Quenville and produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Company. *Volunteers Unleashed,* (Quenville, 2015), examines the experience of youth participants in volunteer programs in Africa, who are untrained,

unprepared and (often) unwanted locally. The release of this documentary was delayed by objections from the WE Day organization. Daniela Papi's (2012) popular Tedx talk, *What's wrong with volunteer travel*? is based on her six years as a recent university graduate attempting to build schools and run a volunteer travel program in Cambodia. She critiques the misalignment between volunteers, their skill-sets and the actual needs of host communities. Instructors at the London School of Economics call on universities to sign declarations, committing to stop sending students to work in Global South orphanages (LSE, 2017). The blog on the university's website argues that orphanages and the volunteers whose support enables their operation, can lead to human trafficking, further destabilizing families struggling with poverty. The blog, written by David Coles, (Coles, 2017) acknowledges the popularity of volunteering and does not advocate that all volunteer efforts be abandoned; rather, the block establishes the particular context for IESL in orphanages. Coles argues:

> Overseas volunteering is also extremely popular amongst students. Making a difference whilst forming new friendships in an exotic location; who wouldn't be tempted by that? Volunteer tourism, voluntourism, volunteer travel, or overseas volunteering, call it what you like, has experienced massive growth over the past ten years. It's seen by many as a rite of passage in modern times.
>
> But with such growth have come problems. Understandably volunteers want to volunteer to make an impact with those that need the help the most. More often than not they are pointed in the direction of vulnerable African or Asian children, particularly those that live in orphanages. Google 'volunteer overseas' and the screenshot below shows the image results that appear. Young, mainly white, people teaching, cuddling and playing with children without a local adult in sight perpetuating the dangerous myth that international volunteers are needed 'to give love' to these children because they lack the relevant support in their own communities.
>
> There are hundreds, if not thousands, of agencies that are prepared to connect well meaning, but unqualified and illsuited, volunteers from the UK with vulnerable children in the global south. The business model for the sector is for volunteers to pay, sometimes thousands of pounds, for such opportunities. By taking part in such activities we've managed to <u>make a commodity of spending time with children</u>. Does that sound like helping?

Unsurprisingly, the power of youth discourses and international aid is not a phenomenon necessarily limited to higher education or the voluntourism industry. A recent update of the Government of Canada, Global Affairs International Development website now briefly

included a "youth zone" section: here children 9-12; youth 13-16; and young adults "17+," can click their way to finding internships and opportunities that help them to understand what Canada is doing in the field of international development. Children can click on apps, games designed to inform them about epidemics, citizenship, famine and environmental disaster. A quick click on the 'Free rice' game app tells young players that they can: "Play 'Free Rice' and feed hungry people. Test your knowledge in languages, math, science and art history. For every correct answer, 10 grains of rice is donated to the World Food Programme. You can help reduce hunger just by playing!" This oversimplification of development and poverty narratives places youths' leisure and entertainment interests at the centre of efforts for poverty alleviation. Engaging an entertainment approach to alleviating global inequality masks the deep disconnect between the logic deployed to encourage youth participation in learning about or participating in international volunteering enterprises and the power interests that have historically, and currently, produce poverty.

Critical Responses to Youth Engagement in Poverty Action

In contrast to the oversimplified approach to poverty through youth engagement, the past decade of growth in youth volunteering has also inspired a tremendous growth in the field of critical IESL literature, including development studies, (Cameron, 2014; Tiessen, 2014; MacDonald, 2014; Heron, 2007); critical pedagogy, (Andreotti, 2016a, 2016b; Roy et al, 2016), and critical race studies (Mahrouse, 2014). This work identifies myriad contradictions and inconsistencies within IESL pedagogy and philosophy. The field of critical research on IESL analyzes the all-too-often invisible ways that IESL practices normalize and neutralize engagement between affluent youth and marginalized or impoverished communities (Tiessen & Huish, 2014; Andreotti, 2014). Vrasti (2013) argues that youth participation in international volunteering is an exercise of power, and a "well-intentioned attempt" to make "ourselves into moral subjects of our own actions" or to engage in "cultural fantasies that allow some people to affirm their sense of self by taking a detour through other people's version of everyday life" (p. 3). In my own research, the desire to position oneself as acting as a benevolent agent of social responsibility can devolve into an act of solipsism. The concept of benevolence attached to IESL participation is often at odds with host community partners' understanding of or reasons for welcoming youth into their communities. From the host perspective, conscience formation of the visiting volunteers, to deepen their understanding of the challenges posed by tourism, off-shoring manufacturing work or degradation of the environment are concepts that they hope will impress upon youth for the need to work for change at home. The superficiality of IESL as a touristic experience, however, renders the institutions and social structures that produce inequality and violence unchanged. In this way, IESL reproduces a set of neocolonial relations, which are complicit in the production of oppression.

It is this neocolonial orientation to education that troubles critical researchers. MacDonald (2014) explains that it is the engagement with and curiosity of the Other that drives the practice of IESL. She qualifies this assertion of the centrality of engagements with Others as the core experience of learning with a caution: that without adequate preparation, or the intellectual tools to understand international experiences, the result for student participants can be disorienting and alienating. In this context, how do we, as practitioners and participants in IESL, engage students in a thorough critique of the dynamics that produce inequalities and the processes that frame Otherness?

There will not be an easy or single strategy to respond to the complexities that drive the production and intensification of inequality through global capitalism; however, critical practitioners work with students/youth to directly confront global inequality as a practice of power. Roy's (2016) approach to IESL is founded on the notion of an encounter with poverty that "is not only an encounter with 'poor others' but direct engagement with the politics of social systems and institutions that produce poverty. Roy's (2016) approach calls for IESL practitioners to engage with development as a 'terrain of politics' rather than a monolithic apparatus of dominance. It is an approach rooted in the concept of an encounter. To engage in an encounter with poverty is not to participate in static study, rather it is to situate oneself in a world that is fluid and changeable. A pedagogy of encounter addresses poverty and inequality, calling practitioners to engage with difficult, uncomfortable knowledge of the myriad ways in which we as individuals or members of institutions and states are complicit in the production of oppression (Lawson & Elwood, 2014; Tiessen & Heron, 2012). Roy (2016) argues that an encounter approach to critical poverty studies is essential in the context of a "rearranged world," one where transnational capital invisibly flows through porous cyber-financialized boundaries and where the presence of poverty is no longer discretely located within communities of the Global South. A pedagogy of encounter decentres the Global North as the sole producer of poverty and strives to make visible the intricate network of sites and relationships that produce power and inequality.

Resisting the Reproduction of Inequalities: Time to Let Go of the Practice?

The power of poverty to enact violence on communities is the reason Eve Tuck (2009), suggests it may be time for a moratorium on research and educational programming in "damaged" communities. Tuck (2009) argues that,

> In damaged-centered research, one of the major activities is to document pain or loss in an individual, community, or tribe. Though connected to deficit models—frameworks that emphasize what a particular student, family, or community is lacking to explain underachievement or failure—damage-centered research is distinct in being more socially and historically situated. It looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor

> health, and low literacy. Common sense tells us this is a good thing, but the danger in damage-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community. Here's a more applied definition of damage-centered research: research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation (p. 413).

Tuck's analysis suggests that those who intervene, even for well-intentioned principles, do so more to meet their need to feel empowered by effecting benevolent reparation than addressing the original sources of social damage. Critical poverty studies scholar Emma Shaw Crane (2015) concurs, arguing that "much of hegemonic poverty knowledge theorizes impoverishment as a problem to be solved: a lack of resources, services or gadgets—a need for a radio or a pig for example. Poverty is often framed as a deficiency of people or of place, or incomplete inclusion into prosperous and benign global markets" (p. 347). Focusing on the production of poverty is crucially linked to understanding how we are to engage with Others for it "informs how we imagine what is possible and what is just" (Shaw Crane, 2015, p. 344). It is at this point that I turn attention to the central focus of this paper: How does a fair trade approach to IESL respond to the political and economic dynamics that produce poverty and inequality and positions people and communities in need?

Fair Trade Learning in an Unfair World

Responding to the field of critical theoretical analyses and empirical studies that document the exploitative and oppressive impact of IESL programs and partnerships, a strong movement is growing among some IESL scholars to develop a fair trade learning (FTL) approach as a way to mitigate the harmful or negative consequences of such programs (Hartman, 2014). Hartman argues persuasively for the need to establish a set of standards for IESL practice citing research that documents how inequitable partnerships "undermine local development efforts, cause tangible harms in communities and miseducate the learners involved" (Hartman, 2015, p. 216). This movement in IESL parallels the international fair trade movement in commodities. Given its growing global economic value, the turn to fair trade practices is not surprising. According to one estimate, in 2012, 1.6 million participants spent over US$173 billion on volunteer travel (Hartman, 2014, 108), with the industry expecting growth to increase in the foreseeable future. The enormous dollar values generated by international travel and volunteer tourism further closely link this practice to the logic of global capitalism. Fair trade learning frameworks emerged in recognition of the highly asymmetrical values accruing to practitioners and participants, versus hosts of IESL programs and as a response to "demands to better manage volunteer tourism" (Hartman, 2014).

The FTL construct developed by the Association of Clubs in Petersfield, Jamaica, along with Amizade Global Service Learning, a non-profit partner in the United States, is a

detailed model of fair trade IESL practice, which combines participatory budgeting and community-driven development practices to help organization partners "stay honest" with one another (Hartman, 2014, p. 110). This work is an important contribution to thinking through ways to respond to the concerns of host communities for more equitable, reciprocal and just IESL practices. Yet in as much as it contributes to pushing forward a vision for ethical standards of IESL practice, FTL frameworks, in an attempt to anticipate and manage power inequalities among partners, do so within a framework that may elide structural change. Linked to techno-management strategies for IESL, FTL approaches are a response to the "explosion in corporate-dominated voluntourism," (Hartman, 2016, p. 222), but do not necessarily invite a response or critique to the ways in which knowledge, social structures or conditions produce poverty.

The turn to ethical consumption is a contemporary feature of the neoliberal marketplace, and for this reason, a critique of fair trade learning practices opens up new spaces to question, challenge and learn from our practices. According to Fridell (2007), the ability to choose to consume or purchase something that has the status of 'ethical' or 'fair' has the effect of affirming and assuaging any dissonance a consumer may experience for their choice. The designation of fair or ethical recognizes that at some level, exploitation occurs, however, and the extent to which fair trade mitigates exploitation, at least in the commodities marketplace, is contested. Fridell (2007) states that "fair traders aspire to mitigate the negative impact of neoliberalism within the constraints of the existing international order, but they have failed to address the aspirations of fair traders to go beyond this and radically reform the international trading system" (p. 99). Given the primary focus of fair trade to operate within a system that generates inequity and poverty, how will turning to a fair trade practice impact host communities over the long term? Does a fair trade approach to IESL normalize some degree of exploitation and shift attention away from critical analysis of the root causes of poverty and inequality?

One of the strongest criticisms of fair trade strategies is the limited impact they have on the industry overall. Developing standards of practice incorporates rather than transforms organizational relations. Again, turning to Kapoor's analysis of international development practices, packaging strategies appeals to institutional marketability (Kapoor, 2005). Similar to international development practices that target specific groups such as "women in development" or hopeful themes including "sustainable development," fair trade approaches to IESL may be a way to differentiate a product, a "strategy to ensure the reproduction of consumerism…the new (approach) turns attention away from the 'old' recurring problems, challenges), mobilises new energy and resources and inaugurates a 'fresh' start" (Kapoor, 2005, p. 1211). Fair trade networks in other commodities have come under criticism for attempting to break with the past and start fresh. According to Fridell (2007), fair trade networks for coffee production have only "been more successful as shaping advantage for specific groups to enter the international marketplace on relatively better terms than it has been at providing a radical challenge to neoliberalism and global trade in general" (p. 100).

Do fair trade approaches capitulate to "the already-evident commodification of education broadly and international education in particular?" (Hartman, 2014, p. 224). Liberal critiques of the negative impacts of IESL see it as potentially a necessary first step toward transformation and awareness of the world for youth from the West (Slimbach, 2010). There is an optimism that a fair trade approach will provide some measure of justice and resource distribution through engaging with the market. Hartman (2016) justifies this position, arguing that "in the international education sector… it is better to call attention to possibilities for equity and reciprocity in a commodified space than it is to pretend that some kind of authentic space of exchange independent of market structures still exists" (p. 224). I find this statement somewhat discouraging. This assertion calls to mind Margaret Thatcher's infamous statement that "there is no alternative (TINA)" to global capitalism and confirms Tuck's suspicions, that some research originates, "even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation" (Tuck, 2009, p. 413).

To foreclose the possibility that an alternative is possible is to subject impoverished and marginalized communities to a bleak future conditioned by the logics of global capitalism and to radically reduce the educative potential of IESL practice. If international education is always-already commodified, what are the possibilities for social changes or alternative futures? Will an FTL approach allow for the interests of power that currently govern our international institutions to continue to exploit and oppress communities for economic gain?

Engaging a Lens of Complicity

In contrast to a practice of foreclosure, the concept of complicity acknowledges the participation of all in the production of social relations, including those practices that produce inequality or poverty. The Oxford English Dictionary (2017) defines complicity as "involved knowingly or with passive compliance, often in something underhand, sinister, or illegal; a state of being complex or involved." I am particularly drawn to the second half of this definition and see in it an opportunity to problematize our IESL practices as a site for critique of our interests, motives and actions with host communities. Seen as a method for analysis, Hoofd (2012) argues that engaging a lens of complicity makes visible "moments of complication to reveal ambivalences embedded within contemporary resistance activities and those interests they resist" (p. 5). It is not clear that compliance with the principles of fair trade will necessarily respect the interests of host partners, nor will evading critique of the principles themselves provide a reflexive insight into the desire and motives that inspire IESL participation. Why and what are we doing in the practice of IESL? In analysis of complicity, Hoofd recognizes a troubling parallel between the actions of anti-globalization activists that actually mimic the actions of global capitalism. Hoofd explains that mobilities, communications and technologies, deployed by activists in what is strategically conceived of as resistance may become merely a

depoliticized act, having no effect on the interests and organizations, corporate and otherwise, that drive global capitalism.

The notion of complicity is further developed by Andreotti (2016a) and applied to the field of education. She calls for engaging with the notion of complicity to reveal the ways in which universalist and hegemonic notions of knowledge, partnership, sustainability, equity, diversity, protection and privilege are claimed, absolved and foreclosed in an attempt to establish professional or ethical standards. Andreotti (2016b) frames her critique as a series of questions organized by the concepts represented in the acronym HEADS UP—hegemony, ethnocentrism, ahistorical, depoliticized, salvationist, uncomplicated, paternalistic. Two examples illustrate the difference between an open-ended engagement with Others and a foreclosed set of principles that define practice.

The first principle for FTL establishes dual outcomes to guide practices: those of the host community and the learning outcomes for student participants (Hartman, 2014). Reconciling these two outcomes demand exploring answers to the following questions: whose knowledge is perceived to have universal value? How can the imbalance be addressed? How is privilege mitigated? How do students understand their privilege in the community context? The third principle for FTL demands transparency, particularly in financial exchanges between partners. How will the terms of transparency be negotiated? How are the epistemological and ontological status/positions of certain individuals/institutions, deemed as dispensers of education, rights and help, acknowledged as part of the problem? (Andreotti, 2016b). By shifting focus from an ends-orientation to IESL, practitioners and participants engage in the messy work of critique which moves it from a static practice to a force for change and resistance. Andreotti's (2016b) heuristic is designed to push scholars to articulate and understand the implications for the claims that are made by appeals to reciprocity, mutuality or justice. Engaging a lens of complicity is a strategy to push the boundaries that FTL principles may unintentionally foreclose. It demands persistent critique of our activities and actions towards Others in recognition of our embeddeness in a broader global set of political and economic relations (Spivak, 2004). This is a step toward acknowledging that we are all participants in the ongoing project of capitalism at this moment in time. It brings a democratic dimension to the practice of IESL that already exists beyond the attempt to structure relationships through best practices or professional standards. The open-endedness of the use of questions engages IESL participants in a conversation and investigation of the ways in which programs and practices may impact host communities while simultaneously pushing the boundaries what may be possible, what may yet come, through IESL practices. It is not a strategy to foreclose the possibilities, positive and negative, for IESL practice, rather it foregrounds the potential to produce new ways of engagement while disrupting assumptions that there is a universal set of values to which all participants ascribe. In contrast to the acquiescence by fair trade approaches to global capitalism, critique and deconstruction engage in a relentless, persistent critique of hegemonic knowledge, practices and institutions (Spivak, 2004).

Desire for a Fairer World

In this analysis, I have raised practical and theoretical questions for the turn to ethical or fair trade learning practices in IESL programs. My primary concern targets the potential for FTL practices to be taken up and made complicit with neoliberal ideology. Acknowledging that desire for greater equity and social transformation may be a motivating force in the turn to fair trade practices, the problem persists with accepting IESL as a practice that is firmly embedded within a system of international education that operates as a for-profit market. In assuming a *fait accompli* stance toward the macro-structures and institutions that produce global inequity, i.e. that what has happened in the past cannot be undone and it is time to move forward, IESL loses its potential as a source of learning leading to social- political change. Next, due to the imbalances in power that exist within North-South IESL partnerships, the obligation to abide by the fair trade principles are most likely to fall to the partner who controls or possesses the resources (Larkin, 2013). This is a precarious position for the host community partner, who typically has much less leverage in terms of resources to ensure they can protect their interests. Further, the adoption of fair-trade labelling masks the ever-present privilege that persists in IESL, driven by racialized, gendered, class and spatial inequalities. Finally, pedagogies and strategies exist to rethink the way in which we organize IESL. My hope in engaging in this critique is to continue to push practitioners of IESL, especially those who recognize the exploitative and oppressive dimensions of its practice and who have turned to FTL as a solution, to continue to engage in debate and to work with host communities to confront the root causes of poverty and inequality.

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